THE RAGTIME SOCIETY

DEDICATED TO THE PRESERVATION OF CLASSIC RAGTIME

P.O. BOX 8 KING, ONT., CANADA

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It has taken some struggling, but we have finally got out a newsletter on the first day of the month rather than the last day, a habit which all too often plagues volunteer organizations such as ours. We'll try to keep it up.

This issue contains several fairly lengthy, but very interesting letters;
-a reprint from Better Homes & Gardens, "How to Buy a Good Used Piano" ;
-the first in a new series featuring photos and/or writeups of the pianos of some of our subscribers;
-a new and novel idea in player piano rolls;
-reviews of new L.P.'s
-items in our usual departments

PERFORMERS:

We recently received a folder from "Cap'n John Smith", who bills himself as an expert in the performance of the Minstral, Blues, Ragtime, World War I, Vaudeville, Charleston & Black Bottom. Cap'n John is currently featured at The Gas Lamp in Omaha until May 16. He then opens in The Full House at Durango, Colorado Until Sept. 5th.

We haven't been informed of the whereabouts of other performers.

PLAYER PIANO ROLLS.

QRS Company, sole survivor of many roll producing companies of the twenties, has come out with a novel approach to the problem of sing-along records;- the Play-Along Roll . While these are not necessarily, ragtime, we reprint the news release in the interests of those of our subscribers who own player pianos.

> "In response to a growing demand for music rolls which enable the listener to 'perform' along with the player piano, Imperial Industrial Company, makers of Q/R/S rolls has something new. The new release, recorded by Hi Babit, is 'Down at Papa Joe's'. It begins in the usual way, but about half way through, the listener is invited to play along with the roll. At this point, the roll plays the accompaniment and the notes to be played by the home participant are printed on the paper in proper sequence.
>
> "Whether the new Q/R/S/ roll will help and encourage young Gershwins or Roger Williams' remains to be seen, but company officials are more than encouraged by the tremendous public response to the Play-Along idea. Needless to say, additional rolls of Q/R/S Play-Along will be on the way."

We haven't seen one, but imagine that you can get one from your roll dealer or direct from Imperial Industrial Co., 781 East 136th Street, Bronx, N.Y.

Peter Lundberg writes us from Goteborg, and says, " Apparently a lot of the R.S. subscribers are hailing Lamb as the outstanding ragtime composer. I cannot say I won't beg to differ with them, but I believe many of these people have come to ragtime rather directly, without knowing anything about the rest of the Afro-American musical culture, and in this case, Lamb would be the most attractive composer, his writing being the most European. His rags certainly are the most complex, but I dare say that Joplin was neither more naive, nor put less work into his compositions. Joplin's rags are generally, or at least very often, of a delicate and melodious nature, but this does by no means imply that he was naive. Actually I find in the way the melodies are used, and the way the syncopations and other rhythmic devices are worked out, proof far more than enough that Joplin deserves his title as the ragtime king. Plus the fact that he was the leading figure all the way, inspiring and helping almost all of the other great ragtimers. Of course, putting Joplin at the top does not make Lamb or Scott one iota less great. They certainly are.

"Generally I think there is far too much stress on the classic side of ragtime. I guess this is a natural thing, a rebellion against the old ricky-tick, hinky-tonk ragtime, but I feel the pendulum has swung a bit too much to the right. Classic ragtime performed from sheet music, was after all a very small part of the ragtime scene. Of course Joplin sounds best when played as written, but with the emphasis on slow tempo these days there is a great risk his rags will turn into dirges. The dirge tempo can, as was rightly stated in an earlier Ragtime Society issue only be applied to Lamb's rags with the composition still remaining ragtime. It is very dangerous to forget that ragtime, after all, is a very rhythmic music, as well as melodic. I don't think tempo matters as much as a good legato execution. Slightly fast but smooth ragtime is a great deal better than slow, careful but choppy. Slow March Tempo is a rather loose term, and there is a big difference in tempo and rhythm betweem the early Joplins amd the later more classic ones. And things like Turpins (except perhaps St. Louis Rag) <u>should</u> be played quite fast, with vigour, otherwise their effect of flashiness and bravura won't come through.

"I don't know whether the question of improvisation vs. music reading in ragtime has been settled yet, but to me the questions seems to be the wrong one. It should be ragtime improvisation vs. jazz improvisation. There is nothing wrong with improvising on a rag provided you play it as written, which may sound paradoxical but is not. It seems to me that ragtime improvisation consists of adding things between the written parts; cadences, the little runs of Charlie Thompson. This is what Joplin did on his rolls. If you examine them, you'll find <u>every</u> note in the original music, PLUS his additions, in this case his bass octaves and some minor notes here and there."

For other news of Peter Lundberg, see elsewhere in this newsletter. Ed.

The following letter comes from W.N.H. Harding, of Chicago:

"...your efforts give an interesting picture of an attempt to revive what may be termed the Sedalia or St. Louis style of ragtime, for as Brunson Campbell points out, there were many styles of playing and this particular style seemed to have had a slow growth, and was largely of local interest. Ragtime certainly didn't reach Chicago, New York or vaudeville in that form but this northern style may have reflected Ben Harney's influence. I speak from experience for in my youthful days I played in our big night spots.

"One summer season I played the opposite 20 minute shift to Mike Bernard, who was then the admitted best performer in the country. He played rag solos and I played for the singers. In Chicago in those days, if you could only play what was printed you had little chance of a future. Rags as printed may have been used as the basis for the coloured boys who had to learn by ear and who were usually referred to as having a weak left hand. I heard many of them, and I think they played the Maple Leaf Rag more as Joplin wanted, than the rest of us did. Most Chicagoans, in fact most large city listeners, liked the brilliant verve that Mike put into his playing, and most piano players attempted to imitate him. In my day our big restaurants seated many hundreds, so in a special appearance with (cont'd on p.25)

only a few minutes to make a showing, it was necessary to put on a sparkling performance. In the smaller places, the slow drags, bucks, and ragtime played largely as printed was possible, but I do not think that Joplin's "Not too fast" meant "To be played slowly."

"In playing for the coon shouters, it was customary on the second chorus to rag up the number to a climax so the singer would get a good hand. For the ballad singers and others, everything was played straight. Among them I remember Belle Baker, Gene Greene, Tascot the great delineator, Sophie Tucker starting to appear in the big time, and others. When Mike went back to New York I took his place and played rags as well for the singers, while a twenty piece orchestra played the classics.

"I knew Percy Wenrich quite well before he went to New York. He was a fine piano player and his style of playing his numerous rags was hard to beat. I occasionally visited the Pekin Restaurant where Joe Jordan had a band, and their playing of ragtime was a long way from the Sedalia style. Jordan wrote a Pekin Rag in 1904 and it is strictly in Chicago style. In those days in the vaudeville houses there would usually be a ragtime player on the weekly bill, mostly white boys who featured their own stuff and who would never have dared to play in the more confined and restricted manner of Stark's arrangements. You may have noticed that Joplin's numbers issued by other publishers are very differently arranged. Even Stark's music in the 1910 - 16 period gives more latitude to the left hand.

"When I started to collect old music 30 years ago, I naturally looked for minstrel items, cakewalks, rags and similar material which was plentiful in those days. I was very successful and I answered numerous questions for Rudy Blesh, which are duly acknowledged in the introduction to his book (They All Played Ragtime, page xii, Ed.) To try to find this class of music in the Library of Congress especially when he didn't know the titles which might interest him, took many hours. A young Chicago performer, a friend of his, used to come to my home to check over things for him.

"It comes as a surprise to find in all your letters, no reference made to Ben Harney who was playing and writing ragtime in 1896. His Ragtime Instructor came out in 1897. Then there was Ned Wayburn who made some splendid rag arrangements. On the title pages of some of their numbers each of them claims to have originated ragtime. We know that Harney introduced it into Vaudeville, and was a great success. Of course coon and ragtime songs are out of your field, but some of them had rag arrangements in the late 1890's, and Joplin's Ragtime Dance also appeared as a vocal number with words by the composer. I don't recall hearing any rags by Lamb or Scott in those days and of Joplin, aside from the Maple Leaf there were few that attained popularity. I played his Pineapple, Cascades and a few others, but for the most part, it was the rags by Wenrich, Bernard, Snyder and similar composers that were used, and all our local boys had special numbers of their own.

"I quit the game and the piano after some 6 years, just 50 years ago in January. I became a pipe organist, and a very successful one, so I've been happy, healthy and retired for some years.

Sincerely,
W.N.H.Harding."

We are pleased to print the above letter, and appreciate very much the ragtime scene as Mr. Harding knew it more than 50 years ago. Mr. Harding raises several questions, which perhaps might best be answered by our readers For instance, we have no information on Ben Harney other than that which appears in the bible. Times haven't changed too much either in the night clubs. Patrons still prefer the fast and flashy numbers, although many of today's best performers can and do play some of the slower and classic numbers. Ed.

SHEET MUSIC.

Treemonisha: There is nothing new to report concerning Treemonisha. As explained in previous issues we are unable to proceed with the project unless most of the cost is subscribed for in advance. A large number of those who originally signified interest have not yet subscribed as outlined in our February issue. If we have scared you off with our lack of enthusiasm, perhaps it is just as well. On the other hand, if you have just been procrastinating, the deadline is April 20. After that date money received will be returned and the project cancelled.

FLORIDA RAG:
This is one of the lesser known, but delightful rags written in 1905 by Geo. Lowry, about whom we know nothing else. He is not even mentionned in the bible. It is a comparatively easy number to play, and is written in the keys of G and C. If the tune is unfamiliar to you, it may be heard on Bob Darch's United Artists record 3120, some of which are still floating around. The first page is reprinted on the back of Spasm Rag and Prairie Queen (Shea.) Florida Rag is the next reprint in our series. It should be ready for mailing by the time this newsletter reaches you. Postpaid, $1.00.

L.P. RECORDS:

A Joplin Bouquet, played by Ann Charters. This L.P. which was originally recorded in December 1958 consists of all Joplin's numbers which have a tree or flower in the title, plus Pleasant Moments and Euphonic Sounds. Every number is performed in a flawless manner, with feeling, and at a speed that the composer would probably be delighted to hear. It is the opinion of this reviewer that Joplin's numbers are almost invariably complete in themselves; nothing worthwhile can be added to improve the composition. Mrs. Charters has played the numbers note perfectly which is usually done only by a person with excellent classical training, and with an excellent sense of timing. This record is a necessary addition to the music library of any serious student of Joplin's finest compositions. (See below for availability.)

The Professors, Vol.2, is a pleasant continuation of The Professors, Vol.1. Paul Affeldt has drawn on a further source of old tapes or records, and includes a short talk with Brun Campbell, plus several of Brun's bits and snatches of ragtime, a conglomeration of tunes and Brun's own ideas all welded together to form the rollicking stomping version of mid-west saloon music of the turn of the century. Brun has always made much of the fact that Scott Joplin was the one who taught him to play, and claims to have been one of the pioneer ragtime players. Also included in the L.P. is Euday Bowman, composer of 12th Street Rag, playing his own composition, undoubtedly as he thought it should be played. We wager that most of you who listen to this recording will be well into the number before you recognize it, and as Paul Affeldt states in his notes," ...the proof that when Twelfth St. Rag is played halfway properly, it can be a lilting and pleasant Rag." Bowman includes the intro which nobody plays anymore, and also another strain or two usually left out by other players.
The other side of the disc contains several numbers by Dink Johnson, which reminds us of a lesser Fats Waller, ..."cursed with(as was Jelly Roll, his brother-in-law) an enlarged sense of his own importance." Unfortunately, his ability doesn't approach that of his erstwhile relative, and we still feel, the Campbell side of the L.P. is the more important one. (See below)

Peter Lundberg. Those of you who had the good fortune to hear Peter play when he toured the U.S. and Canada last year will be pleased to know that he is seriously considering sending us a hi-fi tape of his playing from Sweden to be made into an L.P. We don't know yet what the numbers will be except that they will be first class. More news when received.

A JOPLIN BOUQUET,(Charters), available from the Society. $5.00 postpaid.

BOOKS.

They All Played Ragtime, Blesh & Janis. We mentionned the availability of this book in our February issue, and since then have received the books in stock. These are hard covers, contain the very valuable lists and indexes which the Grove Press edition had, but do not have the photographs found in the earlier editions. Most of the photos have beem reproduced either by this Society, or by others since then, and are probably well known to all of you. All in all, it is good value, at $2.00, including an introduction to the Jazz Book Club.

Standard Rags for Piano Solo. On the day our February issue went to press, we received in the mail a flyer from Mills Music advertising their 2 new folios. We included this flyer on page 6, and neglected to mention that both folios are available from the Ragtime Society, prepaid at the prices shown, ie., Standard Rags $2.50
Zez Confrey 2.50
We also carry in stock Mills' earlier folio 'Play Them Rags' at $1.50

Not yet received from England, but shipped, and due to arrive in early April are the 3 folios, contents of which were quoted in our Dec. 63 issue, page 3. Order now at $1.50 each postpaid.

News from Our Subscribers.

Teddie Beth Hardy, age 18, and a student at the University of Oregon wrote us recently to tell us of Max Morath's visit to the University in late February playing alternate solos and duets on two pianos. Teddie Beth rates Max 'tops', which is all right with us, because we figure he's a pretty good guy too. Max recently sent us a tape of Teddie Beth's playing recorded during that weekend, and it's obvious to all interested that her playing is also 'tops'. Young Miss Hardy has the training combined with the right 'touch', and the result is excellent ragtime. Somewhat like Tom Shea, Teddie Beth is capable of first-rate composition, and has composed several good rags, among them Primrose Rag, and The Good Years, which is to be included in Max Morath's forthcoming "Guide to Ragtime". The Good Years is along classic lines, yet contains sections, the like of which have not been heard before. As we said, fine listening. Keep up the good work !

Tom Shea, is currently working on several new numbers, among them Trillium Rag, and Corinthian Rag, both fine numbers which should soon be ready for recording. Only a few copies left of Tom's First L.P. "Classic & Modern Rags", $5.00 postpaid.

DON'T FORGET the Annual Reunion of Music Collectors at the home of James J. Fuld, 1175 Park Ave., New York at 2 P.M. April 26. Write Mr. Fuld if you plan on attending.

We are pleased to reprint an article which appeared in the March 1964 Better Homes and Gardens, entitled 'How to Buy a Good Used Piano'. Many have asked for advice on buying pianos, andof course the same principles apply when looking at a player piano, only more so. Players are apt to be older and have usually , but not always, had harder use than ordinary uprights. So when buying your next piano, be guided by Paul Gordon's excellent article.

On the reverse we reprint a photo of Paul Keller who hails from Topeka Kansas and who travels around spreading the gospel (ragtime, that is). Paul tells us that he did some studying under Ed Florin, from Los Angeles, a silent movie pianist. Paul has composed Nuclear Rag which we are looking forward to hear. Sorry, we don't know where he can be seen at the moment.

Paul Keller

jac winroth agency
HASTINGS, NEBRASKA

The article appearing below is reprinted from Better Homes & Gardens magazine.

After 17 years on the recording staff of Columbia Records, Paul Gordon retired, to devote full time to his first love, pianos. At Columbia, he worked with—and talked with —such artists as Rudolf Serkin, Leonard Bernstein, Glenn Gould, and Eugene Istomin. For years, while doing his recording job during the day, he spent leisure hours rebuilding pianos "just for the fun of it," plus being an any-time piano consultant for all of his friends.

HOW TO BUY A GOOD USED PIANO

By Paul Gordon

If you hesitate to buy a piano simply because no one in the family now plays, I suggest that you start with a good used piano. There are plenty of them around that will give your youngsters—or you—a satisfactory beginning on lessons. It may turn out that you have no concert performers in the family, but if the playing "takes" at all, you're sure to want a new piano later.

From the day your first piano is moved in, it is possible for any and all to strike a simple note on a musical instrument that will be true in pitch—provided the piano has been tuned. This is not true, for instance, of the violin, flute, trumpet, clarinet, or most of the other string or wind instruments. The piano is the standard instrument for use in teaching musical theory.

Even if no one in the family plays, the instrument is there for those visitors who do. Many an evening of fine music-making has been begun by a visitor who just "wanted to see what the piano sounded like," and so sat down and struck a few chords. The piano is the most popular accompaniment for other instruments—and of course, for singing.

Some rules for piano-hunting. First, deal with someone you know, in your own town or neighborhood if possible, and who will be responsible to you for the obvious good-business reason that he is in your community.

See the piano under good conditions, preferably on a bright, dry day. I was recently offered an upright which was already on a truck and, furthermore, could only be seen at night. When I got there, it was raining, and the lighting was very poor. I tapped the piano and struck a few keys. Then I got lazy. What could I lose, I thought. It was only $25, delivered. Well, when it was delivered, I found out I could lose $25. Moral: Don't shop in the dark.

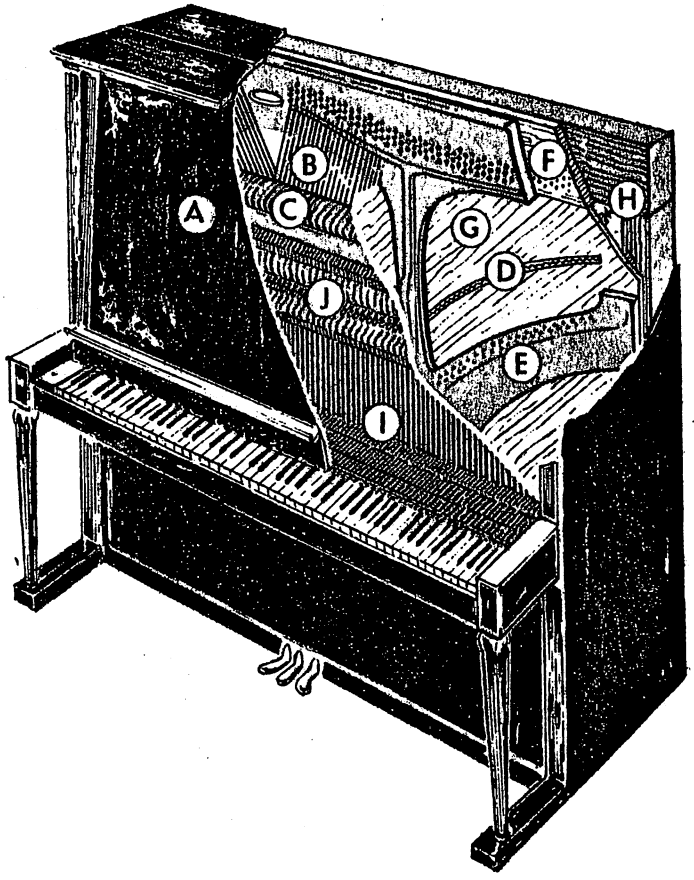
By all means, dark or light, carry a flashlight. It will be invaluable in looking at the sounding board of a grand (you'll have to get down on your knees) or for peering at the hammers of an upright.

If neither you nor the person for whom the piano is being bought play, take someone who does. Probably the best choice would be the piano teacher who will be working with you or your child on the very piano you decide to purchase.

If you find a piano that you like and that sounds good, but you are still not quite sure it is a good instrument, get a tuner or technician to look at it for you. For a very reasonable fee, he may save you much grief. I did just that for a client recently and saved him $200. He was interested in a lovely small grand. [*Continued on next page*

A piano is the result of many more years of experimentation, invention, development, and craftsmanship than most machines today. The elements of almost any piano can be catalogued briefly. Letters locate them below. A grand is about the same as an upright, except it is in a horizontal position.

A There is the *case*, what we see without opening the top.
B There are *strings*, or more properly, wires.
C Striking the wires are felt *hammers*, motivated by keys.
D To transmit the vibrations of the strings to the sounding board are *bridges*, much like the bridges on a guitar.
E To support the immense tension of the strings (160-170 pounds per string) there is a *metal plate*.
F In order to tune the piano, the strings are fastened at one end to pins, and these are set in a *pin block*.
G Beneath the strings is a *sounding board*.
H Between the case and the sounding board are the *ribs* to which the sounding board is glued.
I And finally, there are the *action* parts.
J The action is a rather fanciful and fantastic system which includes the keys, hammers, and dampers of the piano and various other elements, such as the *bridle straps*.



How to buy a good used piano

Continued

Its appearance was good, its tone excellent, but a few strings were badly out of tune. Until I checked the tuning pins, I was in favor of the piano. However, when I checked, I found the pins were so loose that the cost of repair would have exceeded the cost of the piano.

The way a piano looks is a valuable piece of information. But it is only a clue to the make, age, and condition of the instrument. Take in that clue, but reserve judgment. An inexpensive piano will seldom look very good. If it looks great and *is* inexpensive, watch out. Something must be wrong inside.

Look for the maker's name. This may appear over the keyboard or inside. All things being equal, it is better to go along with a well-known make.

Ask the age of the piano. If the seller is in a position to know, it provides another clue. Generally, the younger the piano the better, but this is a rule that can be contradicted. Condition is much more important than age.

Does the piano have a full keyboard (88 keys) and resemble in all other ways a conventional piano? Beware of any peculiarities—in shape, size, keyboard, design. Again, rely on someone who knows.

Even if you don't play, check the *tone* of the piano by playing one note at a time. If it pleases you this way, then try chords. If you feel it isn't in tune, start asking questions. Has it *been tuned?* If not, *can* it be? If the answer is "no," forget it.

Does it have at least two pedals, and do they work? The one on the left should make the tone noticeably softer. The one on the right should sustain the tone noticeably beyond its natural die-away time.

If you play, sit down and spend a little time at the piano. Check to see that the instrument has a reasonable dynamic range. That is, can it be played quite loud; can it truly be played softly?

Can it be played staccato? That is, with sharp, quick jabs of the fingers resulting in little pinpoints of sound immediately dampened. It should be possible.

At this point, and as a result of your questions, you will have begun to examine the *condition* of the piano—the all-important point.

Many amateurs will tell you confidently that the first thing to check is the sounding board, and that if it is cracked, the piano is no good. This is just not the case in considering older and cheaper pianos. Usually, the sounding board *will* be cracked a bit, and often enough it doesn't matter at all. Check it, by all means, but then look to see if the board is still glued to the ribs. If it is, you're okay; if not, move on. If the ribs and board have parted company, chances are the tone will never be what it should.

Next check the strings. If they are obviously rusted, beware. They may break when the piano is tuned or brought up to pitch. If you want the piano to train youngsters, insist on one that can be brought to A 440 (standard pitch).

From the strings, move to the bridges. You will notice that the strings are held in position by pins protruding from the bridges (there are two bridges, one for bass and one for treble). If a bridge is cracked, beware again.

Now move to the tuning pins, the terminal points for the strings. The pins are set into laminated rock maple (under the metal plate). Loose tuning pins are disastrous, for the piano will never stay in tune. This can be remedied, at some expense, but if the piano is badly out of tune, better be wary.

Hammers are not quite so critical. All hammers will make music—the ones in good shape will sound best. If you strike a note and get nothing but a dull thud, however, it means the hammer is "blocking" against the strings. This calls for a regulating job. Also, if the hammers are very badly cut by the strings—deeply indented—look elsewhere.

Bridle straps—tiny canvas thongs found only in the actions of upright pianos—can be seen directly below the hammers. These should be intact, although they are simple and inexpensive to replace.

The condition of the action parts is technical beyond description here. Suffice it to say that the keys, hammers, and all should be free of exaggerated or excessive wobble. Listen, too, for the *noise* of the action as you press successive keys. Most old uprights will have an easily audible mechanical sound quite apart from their tone. This should *never* be so loud as to intrude on your hearing the tone itself. If you can hear action noise clearly and immediately, chances are that it will become irksome to a twelve-year-old working on a difficult piece later on. Approach with care.

Once you have bought your piano, you will probably have to move it or pay to have it moved. Hire professional piano movers.

A used piano offers itself as a grand project for the do-it-yourself regatta. Paint remover taken to the hide of an ancient war horse of an upright will often reveal a surprisingly beautiful veneer under the darkened shellac. With a good refinishing job, you will find yourself the proud possessor of a fine piece of furniture. Unless you don't care what it does to the tone, I don't recommend paint, but stain will not affect the music.

When you get the piano home, be willing to invest time, thought, and modest maintenance fees, to keep it always in good playing order. One firm rule to follow is: Pianos should be tuned twice a year. Regular tuning is the best way to protect your investment. Then, when you want to sell or trade it for a new piano, you should be able to recover a good part of what you paid for it. By the way, if it's the kind of piano I've been talking about, you should have paid anywhere from $50 to $250.

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